

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“The Way of the Cross,
A Lenten Series on Forgiveness:
Repentance”**

**II Chronicles 7:12-14, 19-22
Luke 23:32-43**

**Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 26, 2017**

II Chronicles 7:12-14, 19-22

Then the Lord appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: “I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

“But if you turn aside and forsake my statutes and my commandments that I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will pluck you up from my land that I have given you, and this house that I have consecrated for my name, I will cast out of my sight, and I will make it a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And at this house, which was exalted, everyone passing by will be astonished and say, ‘Why has the Lord done thus to this land and to this house?’ Then they will say, ‘Because they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers who brought them out of the land of Egypt, and laid hold on other gods and worshiped them and served them. Therefore he has brought all this disaster on them.’”

Luke 23:32-43

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

“The Way of the Cross, A Lenten Series on Forgiveness: Repentance”

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Two weeks ago, we started this Lenten sermon series on forgiveness using Marjorie J. Thompson’s book. To begin this series, we talked about self-examination and how that is the first step towards reconciliation. Self-examination and self-reflection open our eyes to our need of forgiveness. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, we saw that the younger son examined himself and drew the conclusion he needed to seek out forgiveness, while the older son had no such revelation. Similarly, we saw how it took an outside source—the Prophet Nathan—to force King David into realizing he wronged Bathsheba and God, which moved him to write the powerful and beautiful 51st Psalm. Last week we touched on the topic of honesty, which is the second step towards reconciliation. In order for the self-examination to be effective, we need to be honest with God and with ourselves. Honest that we do place people as our enemies, and it is from those people whom we seek forgiveness. Sometimes

that person is yourself. Sometimes it is someone who is near, like kin or a friend. And sometimes we place entire groups of people as our enemies, simply because they are different than us. When we are honest with ourselves, we see how sin affects us and creates in us aspects that we do not like. And when we are honest with ourselves, we open our hearts to the Holy Spirit, who brings us wisdom, so that we may learn discernment, and not condemnation. This week, I want us to talk a little about the third step, which is repentance.

Considering this morning's reading, it is common during the season of Lent for us to ponder on the reason for Jesus' death. There are many explanations, or atonement theories, that have been presented and developed throughout the ages. One of the earliest and longest standing is known as the *moral influence theory*. In brief, this theory posits that the purpose and work of Jesus Christ was to bring positive moral change to humanity. This moral change came through the teaching and example of Jesus, the movement he founded now known as Christianity, and the inspiring effect of his martyrdom and resurrection. In a word, love. Another theory is *Christus Victor*, which also comes from the early years of the church, but has since lost favor in many mainline, progressive denominations. This one argues that Jesus gives his own life as a ransom in place of our own, and by his resurrection he liberates humanity from our slavery to sin and Satan—thus defeating the power of wickedness. Here, Christ's love is so powerful that it obliterates the hold Satan has on our lives. A third theory comes from our Reformation ancestors. The Protestants detailed the *penal substitution theory*, which sees our sin as the breaking of God's moral law, therefore placing humanity as the subject of God's understandable wrath. Jesus' saving work, then, places the wrath of God on himself, therefore freeing the human race from the curse of sin. In this theory, Christ's love is so potent that God sees *it* instead of our depravity. Let me say, this is a very brief and short list of theories, if you want more details, let me know and we can start a Bible study.

Now, the underlying theme for nearly all atonement theories is God's love. Regardless of the theory, God's love wins the day and the human race is spared from eternal condemnation. I want to bring this to our attention because many people want to draw a distinction between divine love and divine judgment, much like many people tell me they don't like the God of the Old Testament and prefer the God of the New Testament. Let me tell you, my friends, he's the same God. I believe that Christians are called to hold things in balance that are *seemingly* incompatible. Why would the King of heaven and earth incarnate himself as a humble carpenter? Why is there wickedness in the world if God is omnipotent and benevolent? Why does God continue to love us while we constantly push him away? Well, these are questions the Christian has to wrestle with and just as there are not two Gods, there is no separation between divine love and divine judgment. If there was no divine judgment there would be no punishment of our corporate and individual betrayals against God and neighbor. If there was no divine love there would be no hope and the cross event would be all in vain. In fact, it is the cross that holds the two together. The cross is both divine judgment *and* divine love. We are unable to correct and restore our relationship to God, so God takes on both roles in himself—this is the common thread of most all atonement theories. Thompson urges that “Jesus Christ is the embodied paradox of divine love and justice, revealing God's grace as a form of judgment and offering God's judgment in the form of grace.”¹ Grace is the key to understanding all of this. Grace helps us to understand forgiveness and repentance.

¹ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Forgiveness, A Lenten Study*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014. Page 36.

God's extension of grace to us is his gift of love freely given and undeserved. Like the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, who had all the right in the world to disown his younger son, but instead extended his arms in welcome and reestablished the boy's kinship. For those of us in the Reformed tradition, grace is revealed in our lives by the working of the Holy Spirit. It is God's Spirit in us, which moves us to act in accordance to God's will. Without the Spirit, we would be lost—finding comfort and guidance in the ways of the world. And we have a choice. We can choose to heed the Holy Ghost's guidance or we can choose to follow down the path of our own human wisdom. Oftentimes we choose the latter. It is for that reason the season of Lent has historically been a time of penitence, where Christians seek to realign themselves with God's will through self-reflecting and self-denial. That's why many folks give up things; they want to set aside the things that distract them most from God. It is to this end that Lent is the season of repentance. Now, I think setting a definition is in order. The Greek word that is mainly translated as repentance is *metanoia*, which literally translates to a *change of mind*—meta-noia.

Thompson says, “repentance means adopting a new mind-set, going beyond our ordinary ways of thinking, perceiving, and responding to life.”² With our natural way of doing things having been corrupted by sin, our inclination and tendencies are to focus selfishly and inwardly—my desires, my needs, my goals, my help—rather than focusing on God—what does God desire of me, how might I serve God? She continues, “Either we proudly trust in our own mental or physical powers to meet life, thinking of ourselves as self-made people who can figure out our own problems and do things right by sheer inventiveness and grit, or we fearfully distrust that we have any real good in us, despairing of personal power to meet life's challenges and indulging in self-pity.”³ Our minds, the Greek *nous*, or intellect, if you will, is, because of the Fall, predisposed to focus individually. Conversely, the Christian intellect, the *metanoia*, or changed mind, has to be given to focus outwardly, on God and our neighbor. Thompson aptly notes, “Repentance, then, involves turning ourselves in a new direction: away from [ourselves] and toward God...[therefore] The beginning of repentance is putting ourselves in God's hands, acknowledging that we need what only our Creator can give.”⁴ What is it that we need? Grace. And Christ's going to the cross is God's extending to us that grace, and so we are called to approach the cross and say we're sorry. Atonement theories 101. That is the very act of repentance, being sorry for what we have done or left undone and from there changing our ways from focusing on the self to focusing on Christ. The change of mind is the important part.

I think the Parable of the Prodigal presents to us another perfect example of this. Thus far, we've talked about three of the steps towards reconciliation: self-examination, honesty, and repentance. The younger son approached the first step when in Luke 15:17 we read “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!’” He realized at that point the predicament he had gotten into and knew something needed the change. This self-examination brought him to a point of honesty. He needed to be honest with himself about his situation. He didn't blame his situation on anyone. He didn't blame his father for giving him his inheritance or not stopping him from leaving. His honesty brought him to the facts

² Thompson, 37.

³ Thompson, 37.

⁴ Thompson, 38.

that *he* squandered his inheritance and shamed his family, which is why he says to his father, “I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.” The honest truth is that his father had every right to refuse to call him son and even to refuse to hire him, but the younger son knew he needed to say he was sorry. And so he fulfilled the third step of repentance when he fell to his knees before his father. “When,” says Thompson, “through self-examination, we become honest about our weaknesses, about our pride and fear, about our part in the sordid affairs of the human family, we can begin to notice the people in our lives we have misjudged and mistreated.”⁵ Before we can ever receive forgiveness, we must first open our eyes to those we have hurt and from whom we should ask repentance.

We humans have many ways of hurting people. The Prodigal Son hurt his father and his reputation, and it is obvious how the older son felt betrayed by his brother’s actions. “Most of our ways of wounding each other are emotional. We withhold acceptance, affirmation, personal warmth; we exclude and reject; we betray trust and gossip behind backs; we make snide comments, dish out criticism, and harp on weaknesses; we even shame publicly and play games of emotional blackmail, threatening to expose another’s secrets in order to gain what we want.”⁶ Sin makes us focus on our individual desires, over and against the concerns of someone else. Sin focuses us inwardly. If we feel hurt or threatened, our sinful nature says to strike back and to hurt them in return. Sin wants us to seek revenge. The Christian is called to be outwardly focused. Like I said last week, we are bi-relational, and when our relationships with God and with our neighbors are broken, it is necessary for us to work to mend them. The way of the cross reveals to us our necessity to ask God’s forgiveness, moreover, it incites within us the desire to seek forgiveness from others. Recall the thieves crucified with Jesus. The one who calls out his co-detainee recognizes who Jesus is. He recognizes that Jesus was undeserving of this death, that he was truly innocent. He recognizes that Jesus is the King of kings and the Son of God. And so he seeks forgiveness by asking the Messiah to remember him when He enters His kingdom.

The standard way of seeking forgiveness is through the apology. The actual work of the apology is all about humility and returning to someone that which was lost. In the case of the crucified criminal, he realized Jesus--the one, true King--was not respected or honored, so in those final moments he returned to Christ a modicum of respect that he was denied. Now, Thompson correctly notes that apologies are hard. “To apologize,” she says, “requires an admission of being wrong. This is humbling, but if our apology is genuine, we will need to prepare ourselves to accept a certain level of embarrassment with ourselves and before the other person.”⁷ Again, the Prodigal Son presents another perfect example. Can you imagine how humiliating it was for the younger son to approach his father after all he had done? Can you imagine how embarrassing it was for him to say, “Father, I have sinned so greatly, I have messed up beyond reproach. I am not worthy to be part of this family. Out of mercy, would you at least hire me as a stranger?” This humility is about reversing the power structure. When he had his inheritance money, the younger son saw himself on top of the world, he wasn’t laboring in the field like his older brother, he was living the high life. By prematurely claiming his inheritance, he placed himself above his father as the more powerful actor in the story. But when he was brought low, he realized that the power struggle needed to shift. No

⁵ Thompson, 39.

⁶ Thompson, 39.

⁷ Thompson, 40.

longer could he see himself as the invincible party animal; he had to see himself as a servant. Or take the second criminal, who was similarly astute. He knew his punishment was just for the crimes he committed. Jesus, however, was unjustly crucified and thereby the offense above all offenses was committed against God. And yet, God is still willing to forgive us. When we apologize for our transgressions, we are elevating the person we offended and humbling ourselves before them.

Since the apology is such an integral part of reconciliation, I would like to leave us with some practical advice that Thompson outlines.⁸ One element, of the apology is to acknowledge a particular offense and be willing to take responsibility for it. We have to admit “that a relationship was damaged in some way—in dignity, respect, or trust. It also involves us saying, ‘I did this.’” This first step falls through when we fail to fully acknowledge injury or refuse to take direct responsibility. Key phrases in these pseudo-apologies are, “If some of what I said was disrespectful...” Or, “Mistakes were made.” Or, “I’m sorry if *you* felt hurt by what I did.” By saying these, we are averting any responsibility. Another element is to express a true sense of regret or shame. Our offense against someone has to trouble us. If not, if we do not feel moved by our disgrace, then the apology holds no water. We can’t be more sorry about *getting caught* than for *doing the deed*. Authenticity is the key to a sound apology. The final element is the expression of our humility, which is we make ourselves defenseless before the other. “This means offering no defense of oneself, standing exposed and vulnerable to the response of the offended person.” If we try to justify our actions or blame something else, we are erasing the effectiveness of the apology. Again, repentance is about reversing the power roles. And there’s no guarantee that the other person will even accept our apology, but that is the risk we have to take. Moreover, “If the offended person offers forgiveness, we should receive it humbly and gratefully, with an inward commitment not to fall into such injurious behavior again.”⁹ This is important for the apology isn’t the end-all-be-all. True repentance means we cannot fall back into the old patterns of sin. Repentance is a changing of our mindset from an old way into a new way: *metanoia*. Therefore, when we receive forgiveness from God, we ought not to revert to our old sinful manners; and when we receive forgiveness from another person, we ought not to disrespect that person again. This leads us to the next step in reconciliation, which is forgiving, but we’ll touch on that next week.

Therefore, let us pray. “O God, your love truly will not let us go. Help us to seek, and receive with gratitude, your costly forgiveness in Christ. Then, humbled and strengthened by your love, help us to seek forgiveness from those whom we have wounded or offended, knowing that our sins against one another are first of all sins against you, the author and giver and lover of life.” Forgive our foolish ways and clothe us with a changed mind, the very mind of Christ. “We pray in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, whose suffering love redeems and transforms us. Amen.”¹⁰

⁸ See pages 41-42.

⁹ Thompson, 43.

¹⁰ Thompson, 82.